

# Trivia Shore, The Only Way Is Sedation, Made in Consumerville

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This critical reflection will critique the contemporary consumer culture by illustrating the ways the masses are sedated by trivial issues presented in reality television in order to create “false needs” (Marcuse, 2002) solved by further consumption.

Displaying its distracting and controlling nature Marx famously referred to religion as the “opium of the people” (Hayes, 2002). With the decline in religion’s belief and the growth of media technologies in 1957 Edward Murrow declared that television was an alternative to religion as an “opiate of the people”, that can provide individuals with their moral compass and conception of reality (Murrow, 1957). Due to the amounts of people it reaches, its controlling factors can be influential in the construction of society as a whole.

Whichever drug an individual should choose to sedate themselves with, religion, television or internet, they will be picking their poison from the “metaphorical... virtual space where people

can interact” (McKee, 2005: 4) with the “public sphere” (Habermas, 1996).

Within this “virtual space” (McKee, 2005) the “human interactions are all parts of the public sphere... but... the mass media obviously play a central role in the public sphere” (McKee, 2005: 5). Within today’s media saturated society (Baudrillard, 1983) the internet may be the ultimate opiate of the people through handheld devices but this has not replaced the addiction to television held by its users. If anything it has only aided their access to sedation by allowing for the viewing of program content at the convenience of the individual.



Despite the variation of drugs available in the UK 94.7% of the population spend an average of 26 hours and 56 minutes a week tranquilised by television (Broadcast Audience Research Board, 2014).

Intoxicating society was not the goal of television. As the first director of the BBC Sir John Reith outlined in its first Royal Charter “The Public Purposes of the BBC are as follows— (a) sustaining citizenship and civil society; (b) promoting education and learning” (BBC, 2014: online). Television can, as the BBC

say in their modern day mission statement, be used “to enrich people's lives with programmes and services that inform, educate and entertain” (BBC, 2014) as a contribution to a Knowledge society. A knowledge society “is a society with an economy in which knowledge is acquired, created, disseminated and applied to enhance economic and social development”(Gesci, 2014: 1).

The vast range of television channels available today allows for viewers to be sedated, or educated if they desire, by programs on nearly every subject with many channels specializing in one genre, for example the History channel or the Discovery Science channel offer specific educational programming. As these channels and the intent of the BBC demonstrate television can help in the education of individuals and, due to the amounts of people it reaches, can influence the education of society as a whole.

However, many channels and programs have far more sedative qualities and “deal exclusively in triviality” (McKee, 2005. p.32). Trivia as defined by the Oxford Dictionary as “details, considerations, or pieces of information of little importance or value” (Oxford Dictionary, 2014: online), with programs of this nature focusing their content on subjects such as; celebrity gossip, domestic practises, beauty regimes, sexual practises and other areas of cultures not holding little intellectual value (McKee, 2005).

It is this difference in value, and educational potential, that Habermas (1996) categorised as “commercial” and “commercialized” culture.

“Commercial” culture is looked upon as quality culture and is considered to be more valuable, educational and can engage society intellectually to its overall benefit and improvement. This category of culture is aimed at the more formally educated niche of society (Habermas, 1996). “Commercialized” culture is aimed at the less educated, masses of society. Its content is largely trivial, “low minded... cynical and made purely for profit (McKee, 2005: 83). “Commercialized” culture is consumed much more with television viewers and can be seen throughout many genres, one of which is reality television.

In Britain reality TV is one of the most popular genres of television and is most popular amongst the 18-30 demographic (Broadcast Audience Research Board, 2014) of television addicts. Defined by the Oxford Dictionary as “television programs in which real people are continuously filmed, designed to be entertaining rather than informative” (Oxford Dictionary, 2014: online). Many reality TV shows focus on social interactions, relationships and consumption of an individual or group.

Some of the most consumed programs in this genre are shows such as ‘Geordie Shore’, ‘The

Only Way Is Essex’, ‘The Valleys’ and ‘Made in Chelsea’. Regularly over a million pairs of glazed eyes view these programs at the time of airing and hundreds of thousands more

after (Broadcast Audience Research Board, 2014). Consumption of these shows involves following different groups of ‘friends’, in different places in terms of their location country and social class, and viewing



documentation of their personal relationships and cultural practices in a way that is presented to the viewers as real. There is a huge focus on the relationships of the characters and their behaviour patterns.

Baudrillard (1983) demonstrates consumption is present within every part of an individual and every part of a society stating "Neither the quantity of goods, nor the satisfaction of needs is sufficient to define the concept of consumption: they are merely its precondition (Poster, 2002: 21).

In contemporary society consumption "is not defined by the food we eat, the clothes we wear, the car we drive, nor by the visual and oral substance of images and messages, but in the organization of all this as signifying substance" (Poster, 2002: 21).

Baudrillard (in Poster, 2002: 43) explains that "consumption is a collective and active behaviour, a constraint, a morality, and an institution. It is a complete system of values, with all that the term implies concerning group integration and social control... Consumer society is also the society for the apprenticeship of consumption, for the social indoctrination of consumption. In other words, this is a new and specific mode of socialization".

A reduction or increase in the level an individual does belong or does not "to the system", and therefore the levels of systematic organisation and amount of sedatives present in any individual, is often dependent on the education and social background of the individual in question. Typically the higher educated upper classes belong less to the system, or could be seen as in the bourgeoisie

within the system that produce the available forms of sedation, while the; less educated, proletariat, working class of society are fully dependent on the system, and it can have more of an impact on the construction of aspects of their identity, such as behavioural patterns and morals (McKee, 2005) as they consume more of the available toxic substances.

There is often debate about the levels or type of reality that is portrayed on these shows, and within this genre, and the effect this can have on the consumer's definition of the real or reality. Consumers believing that these are real people acting in real ways creates what



Baudrillard (1983) called a "hyper-reality" defining it as "the generation by models of a real without origin or reality"

(Baudrillard, 1983: 166-184). By engaging with this hyper-reality regularly the lines of distinction between actual reality and the created "hyper-real" world become blurred to an extent that the hyper-real consumed, becomes the real within society (Baudrillard, 1983). Due to the consumer's confused definitions the content of the programs, mainly characters behavioural patterns, become replicated within society.

In the cases of 'TOWIE' and 'Made in Chelsea' the content is focused on the observation of the wealthy upper classes, paying special attention to the way their relationships and consumer habits. Scenes often involve characters; dining at exclusive restaurants, shopping in high end retail outlets or attending parties, all while discussing their relationships or pursuing them. The presented characters,

predominantly, are: self-centred, egotistical, talentless and idiotic individuals that do nothing to contribute to the improvement of society and are completely oblivious to the “private sphere” (McKee, 2005). Despite the idiotic examples of behaviour presented here are tame in comparisons to the ones in *Geordie Shore* and *The Valleys*.

In these programs the focus of the content is on the binge drinking habits and sexual activities of the presented characters. In its simplest form it is 6 to 8 characters that are placed in a house, or location such as a nightclub or hotel, that is filled with cameras to; drink, have sex and argue with each other and then commentate on the events that occur. More often than not an episode consist of the groups drinking, at home and then in a public area, to a point where they are incapacitated or preform audacious sexually related acts in public before returning to a house or hotel to either; act like overgrown children, usually resulting in a food fights or destructive behaviour, or preform further sexual acts with each other. All of which is; glamorised, shown to have no consequences for the characters and presented as a socially acceptable behavioural pattern that is through, shows like these, a viable career option. There is no part of these shows that demonstrate the importance or value of being an intelligent individual with a regard for the feelings of others, instead they focus on “false needs” (Marcuse, 2002) that further consumer activities.

“False needs” (Marcuse, 2002) are needs created by society that surround “true needs” (Marcuse, 2002) of human beings, such as water and food (Marcuse, 2002). Marcuse (2002) states that “‘false’ are those which are superimposed upon the individual by particular social interests interest in his repression: the needs which perpetuate toil, aggressiveness, misery and injustice... needs to

relax, to have fun to behave and consume in accordance with the advertisement, to love and hate what others love and hate, belong to this category of false needs” (Marcuse, 2002: 7).

In conclusion, reality television can be used as a way to intoxicate the masses by focusing their attention on trivial relationship practises and reinforce behavioural patterns. Reality television and television in general, are an example of this on a micro level. Yet sedation occurs on a macro through many mediums with Marcuse (2002) stating “the result then is euphoria” (Marcuse, 2002: 7) of the masses in order to “ideologically integrate individuals into and stabilize the capitalist system” (Marcuse, 2002: xxx) and ensure their ongoing participation in consumer society.

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